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Study Abroad for Faculty

03.16.2012 | International, Faculty As music therapy professor Susan Gardstrom stepped into a therapy center for children with autism, she was surprised to hear children singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The tune was certainly familiar, but she was in China, where music therapy is in an embryonic stage, and Western music is a popular tool.

It was just one of many educational and exciting experiences Gardstrom had during a three-week visit to China in the summer of 2011 as part of the University of Dayton's new Global Education Seminar.

While visiting China, Gardstrom had opportunities to interview music therapists in psychiatric and educational settings. She also interviewed two professors at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, a therapist who traveled to Sichuan as part of an earthquake crisis intervention team, she led a workshop on clinical improvisation and delivered two research presentations.

"Growing up, the only information I remember getting about China was that the Chinese were going to take over the American auto industry," she said. "Obviously that was a narrow and biased perspective, so I relished this opportunity for personal growth. This visit stimulated a desire to learn more about the country, heightened my cultural sensitivity and developed in me a sense that we are all in this together."

The University's faculty study-travel program recruits a cohort of eight faculty from a variety of academic departments for a year-long study of another country, culminating in a three-week visit to the country. The program was launched in 2010, with the first cohort visiting China from May to June 2011.

The primary goal of the initiative is to increase internationalization of the campus, said Don Pair, associate dean for integrated learning and curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences. The program provides faculty with opportunities to strengthen the University's current network of international resources and relationships that can enrich curriculum revision, scholarly study and build on international collaborations.

"There is great value to have study-abroad programs for students, but we can have a greater effect on more students if we change the way we teach in the classrooms here on campus," Pair said. "The effects are immediate: faculty from the first cohort have already changed what they are doing in the classroom as a result of their experience."

For example, history professor Chris Agnew has created three new courses and has plans to develop an Asian studies minor. Agnew teaches Asian history with a specialty in Chinese history, and he took advantage of the trip to conduct research and sort through ancient texts in libraries.

The second group of faculty is also studying China and they are preparing for their trip this summer.

With rapid globalization, the increasingly significant role China plays worldwide, along with the flood of Chinese students coming to the U.S., the program's initial focus is apparent. China sends the largest number of international students to the U.S., and the University of Dayton's international student population mirrors that trend. One in 10 students at the University hails from another country, and 44 percent of the University's international students come from China.

"We need China in our curriculum, that's clear," Gardstrom said.

The University has developed strong, long-term relationships in China that provide access to expertise and connections in the country. Through partnerships and a growing alumni network in China, the University is building on excellent relationships that promise to result in opportunities for future faculty development, Pair said.

After completing the program, faculty are asked to create a plan with specific proposals for collaborative projects in the visited country as well as any revisions to the University's curriculum to enhance internationalization.

Engineering technology professor Sean Falkowski had no previous experience with China prior to his participation in the study-travel program. He used the trip to understand how sustainability is taught at universities in China, and what role it plays in product and facility design, what the relationship is between industry and government and how modern China views human justice and ethics as it relates to industry. He plans to apply what he learned to the University's redesigned program in global manufacturing systems.

Art Jipson, director of the University's criminal justice program, made several impromptu visits to legal aid offices in China, and he found that flexibility was critical to getting the most out of the experience. He praised the program's focus on each faculty member's unique interests and needs.

"The program is exceptional in that the faculty prepared as a group, had group activities and reflected on the experience as a group, yet it was also highly individualized," he said. "Each faculty member was encouraged to make the experience relevant to his or her interests, research and curriculum interests."

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.